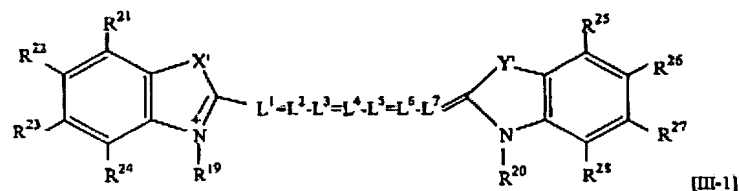


This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

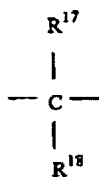
Listing of Claims:

Claims 1-28 (cancelled)

29. (Currently Amended) A sodium salt of a compound of formula III-1 having three or more sulfonic acid groups in a molecule



wherein L^1-L^7 are the same or different and, each of L^1-L^3 and L^5-L^7 is substituted or unsubstituted methine and L^4 is methine substituted by alkyl having 1 to 4 carbon atoms or an alkyl having 1 to 4 carbon atoms and substituted by a sulfonic acid group, R^{19} and R^{20} are lower alkyl having 1 to 5 carbon atoms and are substituted by a sulfonic acid group, $R^{21} - R^{28}$ are the same or different and each is a hydrogen atom, a sulfonic acid group, a carboxyl group, a hydroxyl group, an alkyl(sulfoalkyl)amino group, a bis(sulfoalkyl)amino group, a sulfoalkoxy group, a (sulfoalkyl)sulfonyl group or a (sulfoalkyl)aminosulfonyl group, and X' and Y' are the same or different and each is a group of the formula



wherein R^{17} and R^{18} are unsubstituted lower alkyl having 1 to 5 carbon atoms.

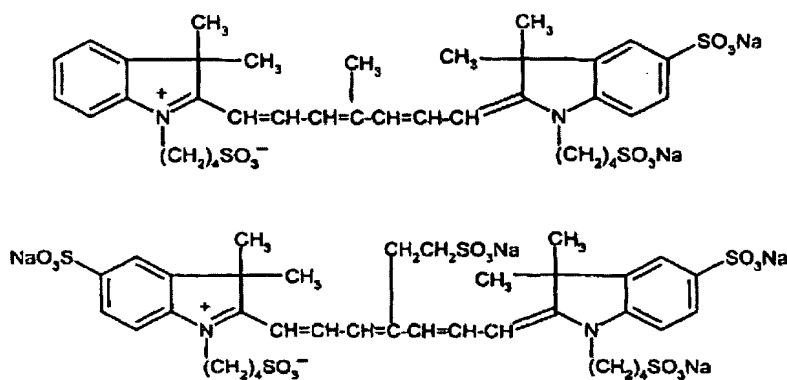
30. (Canceled)

31. (Currently Amended) A near infrared fluorescent contrast agent comprising ~~the~~ a sodium salt of claim 29 and a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

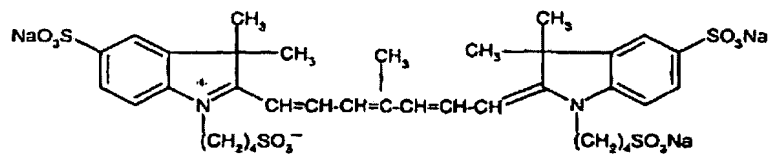
32. (Currently Amended) A near infrared fluorescent contrast agent comprising ~~the~~ a sodium salt of claim 34 and a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

33-34. (Cancelled)

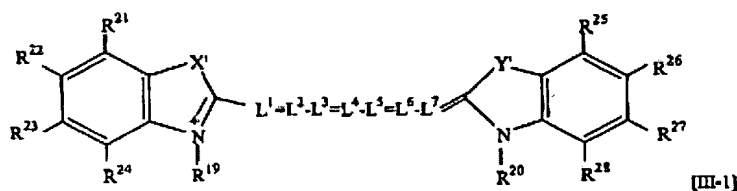
35. (Currently Amended) The sodium salt of claim 29, ~~wherein said sodium salt is of~~ the formula



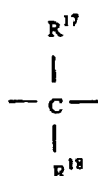
or



36. (New) A method of fluorescence imaging comprising introducing a compound of claim 29 into a living body, exposing the body to excitation radiation, and detecting near infrared fluorescence from said compound.
37. (New) A method of claim 36 for angiography.
38. (New) A method of claim 36 for tumor imaging.
39. (New) A compound of claim 29 wherein lower alkyl in R¹⁹ and R²⁰ is of 1-4 C-atoms.
40. (New) A compound of claim 29 wherein lower alkyl in R¹⁹ and R²⁰ is of 1-2 C-atoms.
41. (New) A compound of claim 29 having three sulfonic acid groups.
42. (New) A compound of claim 29 having four sulfonic acid groups.
43. (New) A compound of claim 40 having four sulfonic acid groups.
44. (New) A sodium salt of claim 29 wherein each L¹-L³ and L⁵-L⁷ is methine or methine substituted by lower alkyl; lower alkyl substituted by a sulfonic acid group, carboxy or hydroxy; lower alkoxy; phenyl; naphthyl; phenyl or naphthyl each substituted by halo; or said L¹-L³ and L⁵-L⁷ substituents are bonded to each other to form a ring containing three of said methine groups, said ring optionally being condensed with a ring containing an additional one of said L¹-L³ and L⁵-L⁷ methine groups.
45. (New) A sodium salt of a compound of formula III-1 having three or more sulfonic acid groups in a molecule



wherein L^1 - L^7 are the same or different, each of L^1 - L^3 and L^5 - L^7 is substituted or unsubstituted methine and L^4 is methine substituted by alkyl or -S-alkyl, each having 1 to 4 carbon atoms, or by alkyl or -S-alkyl, each having 1 to 4 carbon atoms and each substituted by a sulfonic acid group, R^{19} and R^{20} are lower alkyl having 1 to 5 carbon atoms and are substituted by a sulfonic acid group, R^{21} - R^{28} are the same or different and each is a hydrogen atom, a sulfonic acid group, a carboxyl group, a hydroxyl group, an alkyl(sulfoalkyl)amino group, a bis(sulfoalkyl)amino group, a sulfoalkoxy group, a (sulfoalkyl)sulfonyl group or a (sulfoalkyl)aminosulfonyl group, and X' and Y' are the same or different and each is a group of the formula



wherein R^{17} and R^{18} are unsubstituted lower alkyl having 1 to 5 carbon atoms.

46. (New) A method of fluorescence imaging comprising introducing a compound of claim 35 into a living body, exposing the body to excitation radiation, and detecting near infrared fluorescence from said compound.

47. (New) A method of claim 46 for angiography.

48. (New) A method of claim 46 for tumor imaging.